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ABSTRACT

A national study on Adult Functional Competency, conducted by the University of Texas, determined that less than one-half of the adult population (46%) was proficient in handling the demands of modern living. Educators have never done even an adequate job of educating the country's people. If the primary goal of the teaching profession is to genuinely impact the lives of all human beings by teaching them to know and use their own minds, then there is no difference in the validity of the goal whether achieved successfully at the basic/introductory learning or graduate level. Although part of the American social and political structure, educational institutions enrich some lives, but guarantee intellectual impoverishment to others. It has become increasingly difficult for many educators to live comfortably with that fact. Efforts to compensate for poor educational experiences, especially for nontraditional students at two- and four-year colleges, have been primarily aimed at development of study skills through remedial courses. The program at El Centro College provides one approach to the problem and involves a separate division with integrated subject courses and the participation of counselor/instructors and students in planning educational experiences consistent with students' abilities and goals. (TR)

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DEVELOPMENTAL STUDIES:

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY?

By

Ruby H. Herd

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I. DEVELOPMENTAL STUDIES: Whose Responsibility?

I'm sure many of you have already seen the copy of a spoof which, according to a recent edition of the Chronicle of Higher Education, is circulating among doctoral candidates on a number of campuses. It is a doctoral student's version of the doctoral exams and includes tasks such as "Compose a symphony." "Write a full length novel in Sanskrit," etc. I had a little difficulty viewing it as a spoof. Upon reading it, I was immediately transported back to the days of my own doctoral examinations and I don't remember them as being all that different.

I'd intended showing you a copy of the examination because I like to start off with a bit of humor and I can't remember jokes but more importantly because I wanted to use it as an example of what we do to students time after time after time. We set tasks that are just as unrealistic, frustrating and impossible and we do it in the name of teaching and learning.

A few years ago, we took a close look at most of the textbooks we were then requiring students to purchase. We used all the available readability scales, vocabulary lists and our own experiences to determine as closely as possible the reading level required just to read the words in the texts. We were shocked to discover that far too many of these were texts that would have been much more appropriate for students in graduate school. Yet we had put these texts into the hands of students to whom they were virtually incomprehensible. Furthermore, to make it worse we had made no effort to build into their curriculum instructions on how to make

the best use of the textbook, or instruction in learning and using the minimum vocabulary essential to reading and understanding. Nor were we doing a very good job of giving the students information about the few resources for help with reading problems that were available to them in the college. We had put many students, high risk at best and failure - oriented to boot into a situation where osmosis was about the only learning option available to them.

¹
In A National Study in 1975 on Adult Functional Competency conducted by the University of Texas it was determined that less than one-half of the adult population, 46%, is considered proficient in dealing with the demands of modern living. Twenty-three million Americans, one-fifth of the adult population, have great difficulty in shopping, reading and filling out insurance forms, and understanding simple directions. Another 39 million are doing a little better but still barely making it in meeting demands that are essential to success in their job and home responsibilities.

²
Newsweek, December 8, 1975 reports as follows:

"If your children are attending college, the chances are that when they graduate they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity . If they are in high school and planning to attend college, the chances are less than even that they will be able to write English at the minimal college level when they get there. If they are not planning to attend college, their skills in writing English may not even qualify them for secretarial or clerical work. And if they are attending elementary school, they

are almost certainly not being given the kind of required reading material, much less writing instruction, that might make it possible for them eventually to write comprehensible English. Willy-nilly, the U.S. educational system is spawning a generation of semi-literates."

The truth of the matter is that we have never done even an adequate job much less a commendable one, of educating the people of this country. If we assume that the primary goal of the teaching profession is to make genuine differences in the lives of all human beings by teaching them to know and use the minds they have been endowed with, then there is no difference in the validity of the goal whether it is being achieved successfully at the basic or introductory level of learning or at the graduate level. Educational institutions are a part of the American social and political structure too. Yet this structure, while enriching the lives of many of its members at the same time guarantees the intellectual impoverishment of the lives of others. It has become increasingly difficult for many of us in education to live comfortably with that fact.

Much has been written describing the "high-risk" students.
³
 Kenneth A. Bruffee, professor of English at Brooklyn College since 1970, has a fascinating article in the February issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education describing the learning experiences he and his colleagues went through as a part of the "open admissions" attempt at City University of New York.

I quote from the article, "For the first time in our lives most of us were teaching students whose backgrounds differed almost

totally from our own. In fact, our students differed from each other so much that it sometimes seemed impossible to find any common denominator among the 20 or so students and one teacher flung together in one classroom. We were teaching students who could not, or would not, write sentences in a way that made sense to us. They did not seem to think as we thought. They did not value what we valued.

We wrestled with the issue of the way our new students responded to us in class and to course requirements. Many of us were facing what seemed to be "discipline problems" for the first time in our teaching careers. Students weren't just reticent in class. Many of them all too often came late or didn't come at all, and they responded to our pleas for regular attendance with what appeared to be cavalier indifference. In class, they cracked jokes, they openly rejected the value of the assignments we gave them. And when they did the assignments, they misconstrued what we had asked them to do in ways that were beyond our ability to comprehend."

In an effort to find out what it might be like for these new students to enter the alien ground of a college classroom, Professor Bruffee and others on his staff enrolled in courses outside their areas of specialization - elementary Chinese and social group work, for example. In doing so, they became what amounted to remedial students in these alien fields.

"We felt again the anxiety, the embarrassment, and sometimes the dumb incapacity that, we began to realize, our students must feel. We felt the fear of being exposed by making mistakes, the terror in taking an exam, the chagrin of being graded. We began

to perceive that one of the difficulties our new students faced in learning was their own embarrassed awareness that they could not do as adults some of the things that they knew they ought to have been able to do as children of eight or ten. This led us to see that there is an emotional undertow in education especially powerful in its effect on adults' learning, a complex force we had never been quite conscious of."

It has been documented that these "new" students come from all walks of life, all levels of socio-economic background, and all levels of ability. It is no longer, if it ever was one, a problem of minorities. The Coleman report of 1966 called attention to the plight of minority and economically poor white students in the public school system. Cross noted that while the influx of minority students enrolling in colleges for the first time in the "60s forced us to look at the students with deficiencies in reading, writing and arithmetic, the overwhelming numbers of these students were not and are not ethnic minorities. They come from everywhere and their ranks are being swollen with the displaced homemaker, with housewives years out of formal education involvement who are looking at careers for the first time, and the unemployed who are looking for new fields that offer employment possibilities.

Roueche points out that the "new students, although unsuccessful in public high schools, go on to enroll in colleges because most have no place else to go. He adds that there was a time when one could be successful out in the world whether or not he had succeeded in formal education endeavors. As a matter of fact "making it on one's own", being identified as a self-made person, etc. were accomplishments rightfully viewed with great pride. In this world of increasingly

sophisticated technology, the opportunity for making it on one's own is rarely an option. It is virtually impossible.

I read somewhere the other day that if the aircraft industry had developed at the same rate of speed as the computer science industry, a 747 would have taken off for London one week after the Wright Bros. made their initial flight. Can you imagine what happens in the minds of the 23 million Americans who can barely read street signs as they attempt to deal with a world like that? Not even the students who read at the ninth grade reading level, which like it or not, is probably the average applicable to most educational institutions these days, are equipped to deal with that. No wonder millions of us retreat to hour upon hour of the pap that constitutes the current television fare these days. It happens to be the only source of information available to millions of us who can't read - and even the violence may seem less harrowing than technological nightmares where opening a box of crackers requires a reading level that millions of us do not possess.

Efforts to compensate for poor educational experiences are not new in this country. For a long time these were aimed primarily at the development of study skills, remedial reading was added, then writing, then basic arithmetic. Some colleges now are adding pre-science courses, pre-history courses, pre-almost any discipline courses in efforts to bring students up to some mythical level which is supposed to be appropriate for college - or which makes "success" in college possible for the student.

In the '60s when college enrollments were soaring, students who failed to achieve to a pre-determined level on admission examinations were of little if any concern to four-year educational institutions.

Consequently, more and more of these students sought entrance to the seemingly more egalitarian community colleges. The struggles for civil rights, depicted so graphically each day on the Evening News and the sheer numbers of bodies approaching the door made it impossible to ignore the question of "what were we going to do." What did we do? Many of us did more and more of what we already knew was ineffective. We added additional remedial courses in reading, writing and math. Some of us added learning skills centers. Some of us began to integrate counseling and instruction, some of us began to develop programs based on the actual needs of the students.

At El Centro College we started with remedial classes then moved to set up a separate division. We felt the emotional undertow that gets in the way of some adult learning which Dr. Bruffee mentions--we had seen its effect all too often. We integrated courses in reading, math, writing and human development. We employed counselor/instructors who chose to work in the division of Guided Studies - later changed to Developmental Studies, rather than in any other division. We involved each other and our students in planning educational experiences which would teach some of the basic learning skills that were missing and at the same time build up the extremely shaky or almost non-existent egos of our students. We have had varying degrees of success and failure--enough successes to make us know that the separate division approach has been the better way for our students. Some of them have completed Masters degrees and are now working as teachers or counselors on our staff.

We are in the process of evaluating our program to see if we should continue with the existing model or whether we should move toward developing another approach which may offer more opportunities

to the students of today. We want to do more to help students improve the quality of their lives, to take a stronger hand in taking charge of their own environments. That there is any question about our responsibility to continue to provide Developmental Studies as a part of the college curriculum has never occurred to us. It may be in a different format but only if a different model can speak more effectively to the total needs of these millions of potential students in this country who desperately need far more than basic skills to cope with the world they live in.

We are not always sure of our directions. In a recent faculty survey conducted by noted researchers Everett Ladd, Jr. and Seymour Lipsett, 64% of the nations' professors and instructors believe the "U.S. is creating a workforce overtrained in terms of available jobs."

I have not studied the survey so I'm not implying criticism but the statement offers much food for thought. We need to look at what we really mean when we talk about overtraining or over-educating. We have some students who, for economic reasons, must achieve minimal job entry skills as quickly as possible but we would never consider this minimal experience to be maximum training or educating per se. We subscribe to the concept of continuing education or lifelong learning and attempt to counsel all students to return to college again and again in order to broaden their educational experience. Except in the most narrowly defined task, I cannot conceive of the concept of total training or total education. We need to think out statements about over-educating or over-training when new information is exploding around our heads

on a daily basis.

We need to also check out our concerns about whether any of the current calls to "return to the basics" have anything to do with solving the dilemmas which confront us. Unfortunately few of the calls include recommendations for thoughtful, thorough and scientific study of why the problems exist in the first place. There is little concern in these calls for the differences which obviously exist in all of us. Student growth and development may be dismissed as expensive frills which cannot be justified for inclusion in the budget. There is little hope that Bloom's plea for well-designed instruction and varying amounts of time for its achievement is being heard at all. All such calls to "return to the basics" should be examined carefully, supported where there is evidence that the call is based on concepts that are educationally sound, and challenged when they are little more than calls for a return to the concept of education for the elite or 12, 14 or more years of the same kinds of experiences out of which our dilemma has developed. When examined carefully, most such calls are based on the assumption that all students in a given class begin their course work knowing none of the material, and that their final grade represents the effort they have put into mastering the course objectives. The fact is that students begin a class with a broad range of previous knowledge which, if treated, as being equal instead, will cause some students to experience little if any success and reward others who acquire little, if any, new knowledge.

If we have learned any lessons from the past, then surely we have learned that there are a variety of ways to learn, a variety

of ways to teach and a variety of people to reach who, in order to do more than survive must know how to participate actively in the life that goes on around them. The students who come to our colleges deserve more than mere skills for survival. They need also to experience competence and success at some level. They need to experience feeling good about themselves and what they are doing. We need to get on with the business of finding ways of meeting these needs or we are not deserving of being called educators.

1. Adult Functional Competency: A National Study. Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 1975.
2. "Why Johnny Can't Write?" Newsweek, December 8, 1975.
3. K.A. Bruffee, Chronicle of Higher Education, February 27, 1978.
4. J.S. Coleman et al: Equality of Educational Opportunity: U.S. Office of Education, 1966.
5. K.P. Cross: Accent on Learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1976.
6. J.E. Roueche: Compensatory Education, SREB Legislative Work Conference Proceedings, 1976.

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